

Salvation by Grace

[Loraine Boettner](#)

Dr. Boettner was born on a farm in northwest Missouri. He was a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary (Th.B., 1928; Th.M., 1929), where he studied Systematic Theology under the late Dr. C. W. Hodge. Previously he had graduated from Tarkio College, Missouri, and had taken a short course in Agriculture at the University of Missouri. In 1933 he received the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity, and in 1957 the degree of Doctor of Literature. He taught Bible for eight years in Pikeville College, Kentucky. A resident of Washington, D.C., eleven years and of Los Angeles three years. His home was in Rock Port, Missouri. His other books include: *Roman Catholicism*, *Studies in Theology*, *Immortality*, and *The Millennium*.

1. MAN'S ILL-DESERT

THE Bible declares that the salvation of sinful men is a matter of grace. From Eph. 1:7-10 we learn that the primary purpose of God in the work of redemption was to display the glory of this divine attribute so that through succeeding ages the intelligent universe might admire it as It is made known through His unmerited love and boundless goodness to guilty, vile, helpless creatures. Accordingly all men are represented as sunk in a state of sin and misery, from which they are utterly unable to deliver themselves. When they deserved only God's wrath and curse, He determined that He would graciously provide redemption for them by sending His own eternal Son to assume their nature and guilt and to obey and suffer in their stead, and His Holy Spirit to apply the redemption purchased by the Son. On the same representative principle by which Adam's sin is imputed to us, that is, set to our account in such a way that we are held fully responsible for it and suffer the consequences of it, our sin in its turn is imputed to Christ and His righteousness is imputed to us. This is briefly, yet clearly expressed in the Shorter Catechism, which says, "Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein He pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone." Ans. to Q. 33.

We should keep clearly in mind the distinction between the two covenants: that of works, under which Adam was placed and which resulted in the fall of the race into sin; and that of grace, under which Christ was sent as a Redeemer. As stated in another connection, the Arminian system makes no essential distinction in principle between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, unless it

be that God now offers salvation on lower terms and instead of demanding perfect obedience He accepts only such faith and evangelical obedience as the crippled sinner is able to render. In that system the burden of obedience is still thrown upon man himself and his salvation in the first place depends upon his own works.

The word “grace” in its proper sense means the free and undeserved love or favor of God exercised toward the undeserving, toward sinners. It is something which is given irrespective of any worthiness in man; and to introduce works or merit into any part of this scheme vitiates its nature and frustrates its design. Just because it is grace, it is not given on the basis of preceding merits. As the very name imports, it is necessarily gratuitous; and since man is enslaved to sin until it is given, all the merits that he can have prior to it are bad merits and deserve only punishment, not gifts, or favor. Whatever of good men have, that God has given; and what they have not, why, of course, God has not given it. And since grace is given irrespective of preceding merits, it is therefore sovereign and is bestowed only on those whom God has selected for its reception. It is this sovereignty of grace, and not its foresight or the preparation for it, which places men in God’s hands and suspends salvation absolutely on His unlimited mercy. In this we find the basis for His election or rejection of particular persons.

Because of His absolute moral perfection God requires spotless purity and perfect obedience in his intelligent creatures. This perfection is provided in Christ’s spotless righteousness being imputed to them; and when God looks upon the redeemed He sees them clothed with the spotless robe of Christ’s righteousness, not with anything of their own. We are distinctly told that Christ suffered as a substitute, “the just for the unjust”; and when man is encouraged to think that he owes to some power or art of his own that salvation which in reality is all of grace, God is robbed of part of His glory. By no stretch of the imagination can a man’s good works in this life be considered a just equivalent for the blessings of eternal life. Benjamin Franklin, though by no means a Calvinist, expressed this idea well when he wrote: “He that for giving a drink of water to a thirsty person, should expect to be paid with a good plantation, would be modest in his demands, compared with those who think they deserve heaven for the little good they do on earth.” We are, in fact, **nothing but receivers**; we never bring any adequate reward to God, we are always receiving from Him, and shall be unto all eternity.

2. GOD MAY GIVE OR WITHHOLD GRACE AS HE PLEASES

Since God has provided this redemption or atonement at His own cost, it is His property and He is absolutely sovereign in choosing who shall be saved through it. There is nothing more steadily emphasized in the Scripture doctrine of redemption than its absolutely gracious character. Hence, by their separation from the original mass, not through any works of their own but only through the

free grace of God, the vessels of mercy see how great a gift has been bestowed upon them. It will be found that many who inherit heaven were much worse sinners in this world than were many others who are lost.

The doctrine of Predestination cuts down every self-righteous imagination which would detract from the glory of God. It convinces the one who is saved that he can only be eternally thankful that God saved him. Hence in the Calvinistic system all boasting is excluded and that honor and glory which belong to God alone is fully preserved. "The greatest saint," says Zanchius,

cannot triumph over the most abandoned sinner, but is led to refer the entire praise of his salvation, both from sin and hell, to the mere goodwill and sovereign purpose of God, who hath graciously made him to differ from that world which lieth in wickedness.¹

3. SALVATION NOT TO BE EARNED BY MAN

All men naturally feel that they should earn their salvation, and a system which makes some provision in that regard readily appeals to them. But Paul lays the axe to such reasoning when he says, "If there had been a law given which could make alive, verily righteousness would have been of the law," Gal. 3:21; and Jesus said to His disciples, "when ye shall have done all the things that are commanded of you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which it was our duty to do," Luke 17:10.

Our own righteousness, says Isaiah, is but as a polluted garment — or, as the King James Version puts it, as filthy rags — in the sight of God (64:6). And when Isaiah wrote, "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price," 55:1, he invited the penniless, the hungry, the thirsty, to come and take possession of, and enjoy the provision, free of all cost, as if by right of payment. And to buy without money must mean that it has already been produced and provided at the cost of another. The further we advance in the Christian life, the less we are inclined to attribute any merit to ourselves, and the more to thank God for all. The believer not only looks forward to everlasting life, but also looks backward into the ante-mundane eternity and finds in the eternal purpose of divine love the beginning and the firm anchorage of his salvation.

If salvation is of grace, as the Scriptures so clearly teach, it cannot be of works, whether actual or foreseen. There is no merit in believing, for faith itself is a gift of God. God gives His people an inward working of the Spirit in order that they may believe, and faith is only the act of receiving the proffered gift. It is, then, only the instrumental cause, and not the meritorious cause, of salvation. What God loves

¹ *Predestination* p. 140.

in us is not our own merits, but His own gift; for His unmerited grace precedes our meritorious works. Grace is not merely bestowed when we pray for it, but grace itself causes us to pray for its continuance and increase.

In the book of The Acts we find that the very inception of faith itself is assigned to grace (18:27); only those who were ordained to eternal life believed (13:48); and it is God's prerogative to open the heart so that it gives heed to the gospel (16:14). Faith is thus referred to the counsels of eternity, the events in time being only the out-working. Paul attributes it to the grace of God that we are "His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God afore prepared that we should walk in them," Eph. 2:10. Good works, then, are in no sense the meritorious ground but rather the fruits and proof of salvation.

Luther taught this same doctrine when he said of some that,

They attribute to Free-will a very little indeed, yet they teach us that by that very little we can attain unto righteousness and grace. Nor do they solve that question, **Why does God justify one and leave another?** in any other way than by asserting the freedom of the will, and saying, **Because the one endeavors and the other does not; and God regards the one for endeavoring, and despises the other for his not endeavoring; lest, if he did otherwise, he should appear to be unjust.**²

It is said that Jeremy Taylor and a companion were once walking down a street in London when they came to a drunk man lying in the gutter. The other man made some disparaging remark about the drunk man. But Jeremy Taylor, pausing and looking at him, said, "But for the grace of God, there lies Jeremy Taylor!" The spirit which was in Jeremy Taylor is the spirit which should be in every sin-rescued Christian. It was repeatedly taught that Israel owed her separation from the other peoples of the world not to anything good or desirable in herself, but only to God's gracious love faithfully persisted in despite apostasy, sin, and rebellion.

Paul says concerning some who would base salvation on their own merits, that, "going about to establish their own righteousness, they did not submit themselves to the righteousness of God," and were, therefore, not in the Church of Christ. He makes it plain that "the righteousness of God" is given to us through faith, and that we enter heaven pleading only the merits of Christ.

The reason for this system of grace is that those who glory should glory in the Lord, and that no person should ever have occasion to boast over another. The redemption was purchased at an infinite cost to God Himself, and therefore it

² Bondage of the Will, p. 838.

may be dispensed as He pleases in a purely gracious manner. As the poet has said:

**“None of the ransomed ever knew,
How deep were the waters crossed,
Nor how dark was the night that the
Lord passed through,
E'er He found His sheep that was lost.”**

4. SCRIPTURE TEACHING

Let us now notice some of those scriptures which teach that our sins were imputed to Christ; and then notice some which teach that His righteousness is imputed to us.

“Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows; yet we did esteem Him stricken, smitten of God and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and Jehovah hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all,” Is. 53:4,5. “By the knowledge of Himself shall my righteous servant justify many, and He shall bear their iniquities He bare the sin of many,” Is. 53:11, 12. “Him who knew no sin He made to be sin on our behalf; that we might become the righteousness of God in Him,” II Cor, 5:21. Here both truths are plainly stated, — our sins are set to His account, and His righteousness to ours. There is no other conceivable sense in which He could be “made sin,” or we “made the righteousness of God.” It was Christ “who His own self bare our sins in His body upon the tree, that we, having died unto sins, might live unto righteousness; by whose stripes we are healed,” I Peter 2:24. Here, again, both truths are thrown together. “Because Christ also suffered for sins once, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God,” I Peter 3:18. These, and many other such verses, prove the doctrine of His substitution in our stead, as plainly as language can put it. If they do not prove that the death Of Christ was a true and proper sacrifice for sin in our stead, human language cannot express it.

That His righteousness is imputed to us is taught in language equally plain. “By the works of the law shall no flesh be justified in His sight . . . But now apart from the law a righteousness of God hath been manifested . . . even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ unto all them that believe . . . being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, in His blood, to show His righteousness because of the passing over of the sins done aforetime, in the forbearance of God; for the showing, I say, of His righteousness at this present season; that He

might himself be just, and the justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus. Where then is the glorying? It is excluded. By what manner of law? of works? Nay, but by the law of faith. We reckon therefore that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law," Rom. 3:20-28. "So then as through one trespass the judgment came unto all men to condemnation; even so through one act of righteousness the free gift came unto all men to justification of life. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the one shall the many be made righteous," Rom. 5:18, 19. Paul's testimony in regard to himself was: "I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but refuse, that I may gain Christ, and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own, even that which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith," Phil. 3:8,9. Now, is it not strange that any one who pretends to be guided by the Bible, could, in the face of all this plain and unequivocal language, uphold salvation by works, in any degree whatever?

Paul wrote to the Romans, "Sin shall not have dominion over you; for ye are not under law, but under grace," 6:14. That is, God had taken them out from under a system of law and had placed them under a system of grace; and as their Sovereign, it was not His purpose to let them again fall under the dominion of sin. In fact, if they were to fall, it could only be because God had taken them out from under grace and again placed them under law, so that their own works determined their destiny. In the very nature of the case as long as the person is under grace he is entirely free from any claim that the law may have on him through sin. For one to be saved through grace means that God is no longer treating him as he deserves but that He has sovereignly set the law aside and that He saves him in spite of his ill-desert, — cleansing him from his sin, of course, before he is fit to enter the divine presence.

Paul goes to great pains to make it clear that the grace of God is not earned by us, is not secured by us in any way, but is just given to us. If it be earned, it ceases by that very fact to be grace, Rom. 11:6.

5. FURTHER REMARKS

In the present state of the race all men stand before God, not as citizens of a state, all of whom must be treated alike and given the same "chance" for salvation, but rather as guilty and condemned criminals before a righteous judge. None have any claim to salvation. The marvel is, not that God doesn't save all, but that when all are guilty He pardons so many; and the answer to the question, Why does He not save all? is to be found, not in the Arminian denial of the omnipotence of His grace, but in the fact that, as Dr. Warfield says, "God in His love saves as many of the guilty race of man as He can get the consent of His

whole nature to save.”³ For reasons known to Himself He sees that it is not best to pardon all, but that some should be permitted to have their own way and be left to eternal punishment in order that it may be shown what an awful thing is sin and rebellion against God.

Time and again the Scriptures repeat the assertion that salvation is of grace, as if anticipating the difficulty which men would have in coming to the conclusion that they could not earn salvation by their own works. Thus also they destroy the widespread notion that God owes salvation to any. “By grace have ye been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God; not of works, that no man should glory,” Eph. 2:8, 9. “But if it is of grace, it is no more of works; otherwise grace is no more grace,” Rom. 11:6. “By the works of the law shall no flesh be justified,” Rom. 3:20. “Now to him that worketh, the reward is not reckoned as of grace, but as of debt,” Born. 4:4. “Who maketh thee to differ? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive?” I Cor. 4:7. “By the grace of God I am what I am,” I Cor. 15:10. “Who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again?” Born. 11:35. “The **free gift** of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord,” Rom. 6:23.

Grace and works are mutually exclusive; and as well might we try to bring the two poles together as to effect a coalition of grace and works in salvation. As well might we talk of a “purchased gift,” as to talk of “conditional grace,” for when grace ceases to be absolute it ceases to be grace. Therefore when the Scriptures say that salvation is of grace we are to understand that it is through its whole process the work of God and that any truly meritorious works done by man are the result of the change which has already been wrought.

Arminianism destroys this purely gracious character of salvation and substitutes a system of grace plus works. No matter how small a part these works may play they are necessary and are the basis of the distinction between the saved and the lost and would then afford occasion for the saved to boast over the lost since each had equal opportunity. But Paul says that all boasting is excluded, and that he who glories should glory in the Lord (Rom. 3:27; 1 Cor. 1:31). But if saved by grace, the redeemed remembers the mire from which he was lifted, and his attitude toward the lost is one of sympathy and pity. He knows that but for the grace of God he too would have been in the same state as those who perish, and his song is, “Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy and for thy truth’s sake.”

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [Reformed Perspectives Magazine Forum](#).

³ The Plan of Salvation, p. 93.

Subscribe to Reformed Perspectives Magazine

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [*Reformed Perspectives Magazine*](#), please select this [*link*](#).